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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001004

SIPDIS

STATE ALSO FOR S/EC-O/CMS, AND EAP/TC, BANGKOK FOR
USAID/OFDA REGIONAL ADVISOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/17/2019

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL HEAT RISING IN WAKE OF TYPHOON MORAKOT

REF: TAIPEI 996 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Acting Director Robert Wang for reasons 1.4(b/d)

11. (C) Summary. Vice Foreign Minister Andrew Hsia became the first political victim of Typhoon Morakot, stepping down to accept responsibility for his Ministry's initial decision to refuse international aid. Members of Taiwan's opposition party- and some ruling party legislators - are calling for more senior officials to step down in response to the government's handling of recovery efforts. President Ma's troubles will not necessarily translate into gains for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party and there is no reason (yet) to believe it will affect his ability to pursue his cross-Straits agenda. End Summary.

Vice Foreign Minister the First to Fall?

12. (C) MOFA North American Affairs Director General Harry Tseng confirmed to AIT POL chief press reports that on August 17 Vice Foreign Minister Andrew Hsia submitted his letter of resignation to take responsibility for MOFA's initial refusal to accept foreign aid. Initially, Tseng said, Hsia intended merely to offer a letter accepting responsibility for MOFA's mishandling of the response to Typhoon Morakot, in particular for having sent a cable instructing Taiwan's overseas posts to refuse foreign offers of assistance. Following an August 16 meeting of the Administration's "big five" (President Ma, LY Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung, Premier Liu Chao-shiuan and Vice President Vincent Siew), though, Hsia was told to resign by "people above the Foreign Ministry." Tseng predicted that additional Ministry staff will be penalized, noting that the offending instruction cable went out under the name of another Vice Foreign Minister (David Lin) and saying that disciplinary action was the topic of a Ministry-wide personnel meeting scheduled for later in the week.

13. (SBU) Few in Taipei believe that VFM Hsia will be the only official to lose his job over the government's handling of the response to Morakot. Calls for other top government officials to step down have been widespread. Among those whose jobs are threatened is Defense Minister Chen Chao-min, who was urged to resign by opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) but also ruling party KMT members of Taiwan's legislature, the Legislative Yuan (LY). Likewise, Water Resources Agency Director General Chen Shen-hsien's tenure appears in danger. Pro-DPP media are gleefully questioning Premier Liu Chao-shiuan's decision to have his hair died on

August 11, just as the extent of the disaster in the island's south was becoming clear.

¶4. (C) Most critics, however, have focused their ire squarely on President Ma Ying-jeou. Although the methodology of a widely-reported CNN poll, in which 80 percent of respondents said the President should step down, is highly suspect, the results reflect a general mood of dissatisfaction with Ma. In recognition of his growing image problem, Ma convened two press conferences on the afternoon of August 18 (one for Taiwan reporters and one for the foreign media) at which he expressed his sincere apologies for any mistakes his government had made.

Opposition Hopes to Make Hay

¶5. (C) DPP Central Standing Committee member Tuan I-kang, in an August 18 meeting with AIT Poloffs, criticized Ma and those appointed to head Taiwan's relief efforts (such as the Minister of Communications and Transportation) advisors for failing to connect with victims or effectively express the government's concern. In addition, said Tuan, Ma's refusal to declare a state of emergency made it impossible for the government to mandate public companies with unoccupied land to turn these over for temporary use as shelters or staging areas. Public dissatisfaction with Ma's performance, however, would not necessarily translate into increased support for the DPP, Tuan said. It would, however, provide the DPP with an opportunity to challenge KMT candidates in the year-end elections. Meanwhile, the DPP plans to send to

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the Kaohsiung government unofficial advisors experienced in dealing with the "921" earthquake (which occurred on 9/21/2001, when the DPP held the presidency) relief and reconstruction efforts. Their experience in dealing with issues such as prefabricated housing and distribution of other post-disaster benefits, said Tuan, should allow the Kaohsiung government to direct its reconstruction efforts more effectively.

Comment

¶6. (C) One year ago, the Ma administration, already faced with the fallout from the global economic crisis, was damaged by a series of public relations missteps that left many with the impression that the KMT was unprepared to be the ruling party after eight years in opposition. Having won more than 60 percent of the vote in the May 2008 elections, Ma saw his approval rating drop to just 20 percent. Over the past 8-9 months, the President and his team gradually pulled these numbers up, helping make the case that he and his advisors are the technocrats they campaign as and now had the knack of running the government. Deserved or not - an argument can be made that it would be impossible to prepare for the nearly 13 feet of rain that fell in 24 hours in parts of the island - the government's response to Morakot may have damaged that permanently. Now, many people will be inclined to credit his previous (and future) blunders less to inexperience than to incompetence. That said, Taiwan's political system does not provide for a vote of no confidence in a President and Ma will stay where he is until 2012. Even then, even if voters never forgive his government for mistakes made after Morakot, he will most likely remain the KMT candidate for the 2012 election. In the interim, at least for now, his domestic troubles are unlikely to have a major impact on his cross-Strait policy.

WANG